

THE LIVES
OR
EMINENT PHILADELPHIANS,

NOW DECEASED.

COLLECTED

FROM ORIGINAL AND AUTHENTIC SOURCES,

HENRY SIMPSON,

MEMBER OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

"Though fame is smoke,
Its fumes are frankincense to human thought."

BYRON.

ILLUSTRATED WITH FORTY-FOUR FINE ENGRAVINGS.

PHILADELPHIA:
WILLIAM BROTHERHEAD,

NO. 213 SOUTH EIGHTH STREET.

1859.

CHRISTIAN GOBRECHT.

CHRISTIAN GOBRECHT was born December 23d, 1785, in Hanover, a town in York County, Pennsylvania. He was the sixth son of John Christopher Gobrecht, a native of the village of Augerstein, near Gottingen, Landgraviate of Hesse, who emigrated to America in 1753, and afterwards became a distinguished clergyman of the German Reformed Church in Pennsylvania.

At an early age, Mr. Christian Gobrecht exhibited great mechanical ability, and evinced a taste for drawing and design; he was consequently apprenticed to a clockmaker living at Manheim, Lancaster County. His master, however, dying a short time after, he was released from his indenture, and, removing to Baltimore, pursued the course evidently marked out for him, guided by no other teacher but himself. The ornamental work, name of maker, &c., in the inside of clocks and watches, probably induced him to cultivate engraving; and, after passing several years in the making of clock-faces, that business was entirely abandoned for the more congenial occupation of an engraver. His progress in this art was gradual; and, commencing with the simple work of cutting headings for newspapers and punches for type founders, he became, in time, a writing and seal engraver, and finally a die-sinker.

About the year 1811, Mr. Gobrecht removed permanently to Philadelphia, where his principal pursuit was that of a bank note writing engraver; he, however, as opportunities offered, engraved seals, calico printers' rolls, bookbinders' dies for embossing morocco, dies for striking brass ornaments for military equipments, and also executed several medals. In 1836, in consequence of the contemplated change in the devices on the American coin, he was appointed Die-sinker in the United States Mint, which office he filled until his death, which event occurred July 23d, 1844, he having attained the age of fifty-eight years and seven months.

Of his labors as an artist and a mechanic, the following are the principal results:—

THE MEDAL-RULING MACHINE.—This is a machine so arranged,

that while one point is tracing a line across the face of a medal, rising and falling according to the elevations and depressions over which it passes, another point draws on a flat surface, a profile of this line. If now the tracer be made to move successively in a series of parallel and equidistant planes over the whole surface of the medal, there will be thus drawn a series of profiles corresponding to the sections of these planes with the surface, and these lines will together form a drawing or engraving of the medal itself.

Such an instrument was invented and executed, in 1817, by Mr. Gobrecht. In this instrument the "tracing point" moved across the medal in parallel lines, perpendicular to the flat surface or table of the medal, and the profile lines were drawn on an etching-ground, laid on copper or steel by the "etching point." The first engraving made was of a head of the Emperor Alexander I., of Russia, and the effect was very striking, and excited great attention. Mr. Gobrecht did not, however, present any other specimens ruled by his machine, as he became discouraged, in consequence of an apparently irremediable defect in his instrument: the ruled engraving exhibiting a distortion of the features, not indeed very perceptible in copies from medals in low relief, but from those in high relief quite offensive. He consequently abandoned his invention. But the machine, after being improved by others, and the distortion obviated, by a most ingenious device, founded on the mathematical principles of projection, has been used with eminent success, and has proved a valuable assistant to the fine arts.

MEDALS.—Head of Charles Wilson Peale, one and one-quarter inches in diameter.

Medal of New England Society for Promotion of Manufactures, &c., two and one-half inches diameter. Obverse.—Head of Archimedes. Reverse.—Steamboat, cotton-gin, and nail-making machine, in three small ovals.

Medal of Franklin Institute, two inches diameter. Head of Franklin. Of this head, Mr. John Neagle, in a letter to the engraver, speaks as follows: "I am delighted with it, and as a specimen of art, am proud to acknowledge it from the hands of a friend. I had an opportunity of giving it a severe test by comparing it in one hand, with the same head by the celebrated Duprè in the other, and it gives me great pleasure to say that, in my

opinion, it surpasses the other very far in merit. Yours has more of the genuine character of our great philosopher and statesman. I could point out many great beauties over the other, and many more truths in yours, but I forbear till I have the pleasure of seeing you."

Head of Charles Carroll, of Carrollton, two inches diameter. Of this medal, Mr. Carroll's grandson writes as follows: "The impressions of the dies you sent me were very much admired by every one at a dinner given on the birthday of my grandfather, and pronounced excellent. Mr. R. Gilmore says the execution of it is superior to the one he had executed in Europe."

Medal Massachusetts Mechanics' Charitable Association, one and one-half inches diameter. Device: Female figure sitting and instructing a youth, scattered around screw, lever, wheel, and axle, &c.

Seal of Pennsylvania Hospital, steel, two inches in diameter. Device: The Good Samaritan. In the centre, the wounded man seated on the ass, with his right arm over the Samaritan's shoulder and supported by him; in front of the ass the innkeeper with his arms extended and holding the sick man's left arm. The face of the die is engraved to represent the front of the inn.

Mr. Gobrecht executed in brass the dies for embossing the morocco covers for the Boston Token from 1831 to 1836, and a die of Trinity Church, Boston, for the cover of a Paragraph Bible. Also a large eagle with expanded wings for a Philadelphia Token, and a fanciful design first used by himself for a card, and afterwards, with the lettering taken out, for a book cover. Of the many seals in brass none are of general interest except a seal with the heads of Drs. Physick, Wistar, and Rush, in profile, and a seal with an engraving of St. Andrew's Church upon it. Of Mr. Gobrecht's services in effecting the change of device on the coin, too high an estimate can hardly be made. When it is taken into consideration that, in the position of engraver under Government, the judgment and experience of the artist is controlled and frequently overruled by suggestions almost amounting to commands; that devices are contemplated appropriate for medals, but inappropriate for coins, and impracticable from the mechanical difficulties arising from the necessary rapidity of coining; that the opinions of a large number

of persons must be consulted, and the various tastes of the public satisfied, the mere fact that a new coinage has been received with general commendation, is ample proof of the patient industry and skilful genius of him who under all these restraints has presented a creditable specimen of his art. In the history of the coinage of this country, the period during which Mr. Gobrecht was engraver, will not readily be forgotten.

In addition to his skill as engraver, Mr. Gobrecht was no less ingenious in other branches. Although no performer on any instrument he was a scientific musician, and constructed two musical instruments on the principle of the melodeon, but long before that instrument was thought of. He also devised a speaking doll, about the time Maelzel's puppets were exciting attention. A camera-lucida with steel mirrors, by which one part of the eye received, by reflection, the impression of the object, and another part the *direct* impression of the pencil and paper beneath, without the interposition of any foreign medium, was constructed by him, and is a neat and useful instrument.

THOMAS GODFREY.

It is painful to know that the fate of genius has become a standing theme with the historian or biographer. Trite and familiar, however, as are the reflections which present themselves, yet, every instance of the melancholy destiny, on earth, of some of the gifted children of lofty aspirations and impulses, will always beget a due share of sorrowful regret. It must needs be that sympathy should be awakened for the untoward fortunes of those who lived neglected; struggling, perhaps, with the evils of penury, or the cruelty of ignorant prejudice, and dying without the cheering consciousness that the world hereafter would honor their names, or even know that they once lived.

But, if sensibilities, so honorable to our nature, are mournfully experienced in the breast, when a neglect in properly estimating or encouraging merit is perceived, of what nature should be our